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Tanzania refuses COVID-19 vaccines

Government officials have dismissed COVID-19 vaccines and promoted unfounded remedies. Munyaradzi Makoni reports.

On Feb 2, 2021, in Dodoma, Tanzania's capital, the health minister announced that the country "has no plans in place to accept COVID-19 vaccines". The message follows days after President John Magufuli expressed doubt about vaccines sourced abroad, without offering evidence. He said the health ministry will only adopt vaccinations after they had been certified by Tanzania's own experts.

"We are not yet satisfied that those vaccines have been clinically proven safe", Health Minister Dorothy Gwajima told the news conference, flanked by unmasked government health officials.

In the glare of cameras, Gwajima and the health officials drank a herbal concoction including ginger, garlic, and lemons, and inhaled steam from herbs, promoting them as natural means of killing the virus. Gwajima went on to warn journalists about reporting unofficial figures on COVID-19 or any disease.

Tanzania's COVID-19 response is distressing. At the government-run Mount Meru Hospital in Arusha, a small city in northern Tanzania, the first COVID-19 case was recorded on March 16, 2020. This case saw Tanzanian Prime Minister Kassim Majaliwa closing

all schools the next day, extending this closure to universities the following day and banning all public gatherings, with the exception of churches and mosques.

By April, 2020, Tanzania stopped releasing official COVID-19 statistics. There had been 509 positive cases, 21 deaths, and 183 recoveries—a figure officially unchanged to date. In

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As the second wave of COVID-19 sweeps through Africa, and a third looks likely, the exact numbers of cases and deaths in Tanzania remain unknown.

"You should stand firm. Vaccinations are dangerous. If the White man was able to come up with vaccinations, he should have found a vaccination for AIDS by now; he would have found a vaccination [for] tuberculosis by now; he would have found a vaccination for malaria by now; he would have found a vaccination for cancer by now", he said at the end of January, 2021.

Tanzania's reasons for refusing COVID-19 vaccines are baffling. "I think the government was compelled to take that decision because they had already declared Tanzania a COVID-19-free country", Zitto Kabwe, party leader of the Alliance for Change and Transparency (the third largest political party in Tanzania and main opposition in Zanzibar), told *The Lancet*.

"I feel very sad for my country men and women", says Kabwe. "The government has abdicated its duty to protect the lives of the people and it must be

held to account. I can't comprehend the government approach at all. I simply see it as mumbling and dangerous."

Matshidiso Moeti, head of the WHO Regional Office for Africa, encouraged Tanzania to prepare for the vaccine, to put in place the preventive measures to protect its population, and to share data on the COVID-19 situation with WHO and neighbouring countries.

"Science shows that vaccines work", Moeti said during a virtual press briefing.

"Tanzania is a sovereign country, we can't go there and pull down data", said John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, responding to *The Lancet* during a weekly press briefing. He says Africa needs to work with a collaborative spirit on COVID-19 and Tanzania will need to review its stance. "Not cooperating will make it dangerous for everybody", Nkengasong said. "We know what works", he added, warning that all Africa's instruments and targets for development will be compromised "if we don't get this virus out of our way".

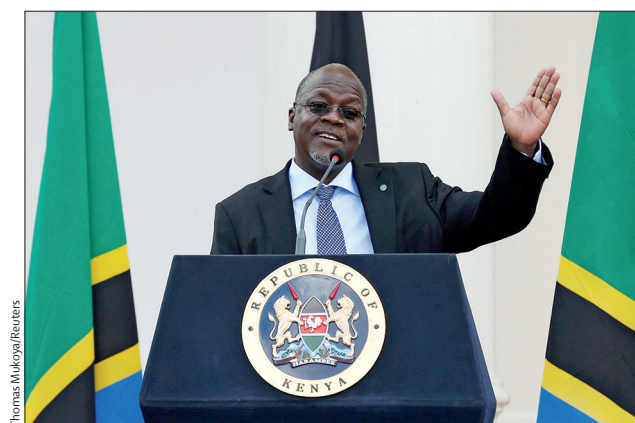
On Feb 3, 2021, a forecast of COVID-19 vaccine distribution was published by COVAX—the international collaboration between Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, WHO, and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations to ensure equitable access to vaccines. Tanzania is not on the distribution list.

"Participants that do not appear in the list have either exercised their rights to opt-out, have not submitted vaccine requests, or have not yet been allocated doses", Gavi told *The Lancet*.

Burundi, Eritrea, and Madagascar are among other African absentees on the COVAX forecast list.

Tanzania's Ministry of Health did not respond to a request to comment.

Munyaradzi Makoni



Thomas Mukoya/Reuters